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WAGNER

HIS MUSICAL THEORIES

REID TAYLOR, B.C.L.

ADVOCATE

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BY

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WAGNER.

The great ignorance displayed by musicians in this country, of the principles, tendencies and theories of Richard Wagner, have induced me to publish this pamphlet, which gives a short exposition of his ideas, supported by quotations from his writings. Men talk of him, and deliberately give their opinion, generally condemnatory, upon his works, without understanding the first principles of the problems in musical æsthetics propounded by him. I have endeavoured, in these few lines, to give a general explanation of his theories, drawn from his own writings, from careful study of his music, and from frequent attendance at performances of it; and hope that it may not prove altogether uninteresting.

The basis of Wagner's so-called "Music of the Future," is this: the union in their most perfect state of development of Music, Poetry and Mimetics,—each supporting and enhancing the expressive power of the other, without one obtaining undue prominence at the expense of the others, so that high poetical art shall not be reduced to a chaotic mass of incoherent words, by contrapunctal, or other musical conventionalities, that noble and sublime harmonies shall not be rendered ridiculous by verbal trivialities, and, lastly, that the judicious combination of the two arts shall be presented by actors duly qualified, and possessing the innate fire necessary to give them the proper dramatic effect. We see, then, that the musical drama is formed by the union of three elements,—Poetry, Music and Mimetics. These we will treat of separately in their order.

Verse.—First of all, the subject matter, or Poetry, must be taken into consideration.

By the present system, the custom is that the composer selects the skeleton of a story for his theme, upon which shadowy foundation he composes his work. After its completion, a so-called *librettist* is employed to write verse to suit the music. No man of high talents would descend to such a task voluntarily; and supposing that necessitous circumstances should compel him to undertake it, is it possible for him to convey inspiration when restricted to a stereotyped form?

Inspiration cannot be applied at any moment, as steam is to an engine;

it is not always ready to be brought into play. The poet, the musician, the painter, have each his moods when the spirit of creative impulse seizes upon him ; it is then, when carried away by enthusiasm and love of his art, that he pours forth his burning thoughts to the world. At no time will genius be trammelled, or directed into any definite path ; hence the inferior character of our *libretti*, and of the words of most of our songs. Can we, therefore, wonder that the *libretti* at present in vogue are such literary rubbish ; that the maudlin character of the words should, in some of the finest parts of an opera, tinge the sublimity of the music with ridicule, by drawing the attention of the spectator from the glorious beauty of the harmony, to the grotesque deformity of its companion.

The majority of listeners bestow their attention exclusively upon the *sounds*, totally regardless of the poetic thought of which the music should be the exponent. By a strange perversity, the Opera, in England, is rendered in the Italian language, which is, to nine-tenths of the audience, incomprehensible, and custom and prejudice have, as yet, prevented the successful introduction of English Opera. It cannot be denied that the Italian tongue is more suitable to be set to music, owing to its cuphoniousness ; but this recognizes the supremacy of sound at the expense of the poetic subject matter, which is in opposition to one of Wagner's first principles. Surely it must be admitted that this state of things is defective. If words are of no importance, why have them ? If they are, let them be the high inspirations of a true poet ; let them originate with him, and be the expression in language of his own thoughts, created spontaneously, and not served up for any special object or occasion. Let the highest emotion which poetry is capable of calling forth be brought into action.

And now as to what themes will form the best basis for the musical drama.

It is the opinion of Wagner, that "mythos" (that is to say, ancient myths handed down by tradition from the most remote periods, and familiar as household words) is the only one suitable. "This," he says, "and this alone, can possess a purely human interest, and be free from the fetters of all historic conventionality, appealing to the *feelings* of men, instead of to their abstract understanding," and, he continues, "from numerous experiments, it results as an inevitable conclusion that, with such an end in view, historical and political matter, because it cannot bear the necessary condensation without becoming vague and losing its character, is unmalleable, and because it cannot be produced without raising national or political prejudices, it cannot

appeal to the feelings alone ; therefore the proper material for the construction of a musical drama is mythos, and mythos alone."

Mr. Edward Dannreuther, Conductor of the Wagner Society of London, in his treatise on Wagner, says :—"Two facts are certain as regards the different means by which poets have tried to enhance the power of every-day language, so as to render it capable of exercising a direct influence on our feelings—*Rhythm* and *Rhyme*—i.e., regularity and melody. These facts are, firstly, that the poets of the middle ages, to attain regularity of rhythm, constructed their verses according to some fixed melody or other ; and, secondly, that the condition from which the astonishing, and, to us, incomprehensible variety of Greek metres arose, was the inseparable and ever-present combined action of mimetics, or rather of the movements of an ideal dance, with the poetical language as it was sung or chanted."

After a discussion upon the different styles and metres of versification, he continues :—"Seeing that modern versification offers such small attraction, Wagner was led to ask himself, what sort of rhythmical speech it might be that was most intimately connected with musical diction, and the answer was not far to seek. Just as we have seen, the poetical material condensed by dramatists for their purposes, so the expression of our daily speech will have to be condensed. When we speak under the presence of some strong emotion, we involuntarily drop conventional phraseology ; we contract our accents and enforce them with a raised voice ; our words become rhythmical ; our expressions terse and to the point. In the early days of all the Teutonic languages, such a manner of speech had been used for artistic purposes ; it is the *alliterative* verse of the Edda of Beowulf, &c.

The condensed form and close relative position of the accented vowels in alliterative verse give to it an emotional intensity, which renders it peculiarly musical. When a poet conceives this sort of verse—and, indeed, the fact holds good in a lesser degree with all sorts of verse—he is never without some sense of harmony in connection with the melody of his words. And at this point, the musician, whose art enables him to give precise expression to the vaguely conceived harmonies of the poet, steps in, and, on the basis of this harmony, he proceeds to fix the exact melody pertaining to the verse, and thus finally to complete the desire for perfect poetical expression.

The following extract is taken from a letter of Wagner's (*Brief an einem Französischen Freund*) :—"Referring to the hopes and wishes so frequently expressed by the great poets of attaining in the Opera an ideal *genre*, I came

to believe that the poet's co-operation, so decisive in itself, would be perfectly spontaneous on his part and desired by him. I endeavoured to obtain a key to this aspiration, and thought to have found it in the desire so natural to a poet, and which, in him, directs both conception and form, to employ the instrument of abstract ideas—language—in a manner which would take affect on the feelings. As this tendency is already predominant in the invention of poetical subject matter, and as only that picture of human life may be called poetical, in which all motives comprehensible to abstract reason, only disappear so as to present themselves rather as motives of purely human feeling ; in like manner this tendency is obviously the only one to determine the form and expression of poetical execution. In his language, the poet tries to substitute the original sensuous signification of words for their abstract and conventional meaning, and by rhythmical arrangement and the almost musical ornament of rhyme in the verse, to assure an effect to his phrases which will charm and captivate our feelings. This tendency, essential to the poet, conducts him finally to the limits of his art, where it comes into immediate contact with music ; and the most complete poetic work would, therefore, be that which in its ultimate perfection would resolve itself into music."

MUSIC.—There is a wide distinction between the school of the old masters, tied and bound by complicated rules of counterpoint, canon and fugue, prohibited intervals, hidden consecutives, &c., and the modern, which considers music as appealing to the emotions and representative of the feelings of daily life.

The former is an abstract science ; an art created and elaborated by the contrapuntists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and totally incomprehensible to the uninitiated, and unappreciable by the ear, ignorant of the many laws which regulate the progression and elaboration of its melodic themes. A composition of this description resembles a mathematical problem, following regular, fixed rules ; the laboured production of profound study and long application. To understand and properly to enjoy this music a thorough musical education is requisite.

The latter is free from all positive artificial laws ; it is the channel through which the composer conveys his thoughts, and lays before the world his secret emotions. No definite rules restrict the range of his imagination. Whatever is not discordant (I use the word in its simpler sense as meaning disagreeable to the ear) is allowed. No positive, definite musical form is

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imperative ; so that the hearers can enter into the spirit of the composer and seize upon his thoughts, thereby shariug his emotions, without any preparatory education, except what nature has given to most men—that delicious, indescribable sensation produced by the concord of sweet sounds. The former is for the enjoyment of the few ; the latter of the many.

To those wh~ understand them, nothing is more delightful than to follow the mighty genius of a Bach in his glorious compositions, those splendid triumphs of musical art, and to be lost in amazement at the tremendous abilities which produced them. To one educated in the severe school, and conversant with these and similar great productions, other music seems tame, and a taste is acquired which unfits, to a great extent, for the enjoyment of any other style. Being an ardent admirer of the so-called classical school, the reader must not imagine that I wish to speak against music of this character. It is a study of the highest sort, and capable of affording great enjoyment, but it appeals, in a great measure, to the abstract understanding, and consequently, is, and must ever be, the luxury of the few, and therefore cannot benefit the great mass of mankind. Thus we have divided music into two schools of the old arts, one written according to fixed rules, the other recognizing as paramount the dramatic principle.

In many of the instrumental works of the great masters, this principle is recognized. Even the great Bach, known to most people only as a writer of fugues, gives us examples of this kind. In one composition he represents youth leaving home for the war,—the lamentations of his friends,—the march of troops,—his triumphant return ; and what beautiful specimens of his style are to be found in his celebrated " Passion Music."

The impassioned sonatas of Beethoven breathe the spirit of poetry all through them ; and is not the dramatic significance of his symphonies amount.

The instrumental works of modern composers, such as Schumann, Berlioz, are still more clearly based upon the dramatic principle, pressing, in most cases, no definite musical form, but consisting of a succession of emotional phrases, of a character corresponding to the idea conveyed by the title of the composition.

At this point, a few historical notes may prove interesting. Among the ant Greeks, music seems to have had a paramount influence, and to have been intimately interwoven with their daily existence. Some authors hold

that the addresses of their public men were declaimed or chanted, so that the laws of Solon may have been expounded by the great legislator, lyre in hand. But the art must have been in a very primitive condition, as we have no evidence that they possessed the knowledge of harmony, but merely made use of melodies in unison.

Coming down to the middle ages, we find music cultivated in its higher forms in the churches only, and it is in the ritualistic melodies of that time, that we trace the first symptoms of the formation of independent parts working simultaneously, that is counterpoint. Counterpoint is supposed to have originated in the Netherlands. In the polyphonous church music of that country its developement took place, and we subsequently find it in Italy, culminating in the compositions of Palestrina, &c. Its first use, then, was for the embellishment of the monotonous ritualistic melodies, the original melody being called the plain song, or *canto fermo*, to distinguish it from the counterpoint founded upon it. From this arose the musical artifices of double counterpoint, canon, fugue, &c., being the offspring of active minds, rebelling against the indolence of monastic life, the product of the speculations of men, turned by forced seclusion and separation from active life and passing events, into the channel of abstract thought.

The Opera is said to have had its origin in the attempted revival of Greek plays and music, and was first produced at Florence towards the end of the sixteenth century. Some time after, it was introduced into France by Jean Baptiste Lulli, under the auspices of Cardinal Mazarin. There it was gradually elaborated into the present grand Opera, with its innumerable adjuncts. Compositions were written for the purpose of displaying the vocal contortions of a singer, who would often dictate to the composer what pleased his fancy or what did not, while the *librettist* became a mere tool in the hands of the latter. The music was not set to the words, but the words to the music; hence the inconsistencies and absurdities in the relations of music and words in some Operas. As it was found impossible to maintain the dramatic interest by a succession of *airs*, recourse was had to the recitative. It had been long in use in the churches, serving for the rendering of Scripture texts, &c., and it now serves in the Opera as a connecting link between the different airs. It consists of a musically recited dialogue, and by it the dramatic interest is maintained in explanatory portions, not susceptible of being set to regular musical forms. There is little variety in recitative, consequently its general uniformity has rendered it rather monotonous, and its forms stereotyped.

Rameau was the first French composer who set his face against the arrogance of performers, and endeavoured to confine them to their proper position as *interpreters* of the ideas of the composer. After him, Gluck contended for the due position of the drama in its relationship to music.

Gluck, in his dedication to "Alceste," says :—" When I undertook to set this poem, it was my design to divest the music entirely of all those abuses with which the vanity of singers, or the too great complacency of composers, has so long disfigured the Italian Opera, and rendered the most beautiful and magnificent of all public exhibitions the most tiresome and ridiculous. It was my intention to confine music to its true dramatic province of assisting poetical expression, and of augmenting the interest of the fable, without interrupting the action or chilling it with useless and superfluous ornaments ; for the office of music when joined to poetry, seemed to me to resemble that of coloring in a correct and well-disposed design, where the lights and shades only seem to animate the figure without altering the outline. I determined, therefore, not to stop an action in the heat of a spirited dialogue for a tedious *ritoruel*, nor to impede the progress of passion by lengthening a single syllable of a favorite word merely to display agility of throat, and I was equally inflexible in my resolution not to employ the orchestra to so poor a purpose as that of giving time for the recovery of breath sufficient for a long and unmeaning cadence. I never thought it necessary to hurry through the second part of a song, though the most impassioned and important, in order to repeat the words of the first part regularly four times, merely to finish the air when the sense is unfinished, and to give an opportunity to the singer of showing that he has the impertinent power of varying passages and disguising them till they shall be no longer known to the composer himself. In short, I tried to banish all those vices of the musical drama against which good sense and reason have in vain so long exclaimed. I imagined that the overture ought to prepare the audience for the action of the piece, and serve as a kind of argument to it ; that the instrumental accompaniments should be regulated by the interest of the drama, and not leave a void in the dialogue between the air and the recitative ; that they should neither break into the sense and connection of a period, nor wantonly interrupt the energy or heat of the action ; and, lastly, it was my opinion that my first and chief care, as a dramatic composer, was to aim at a noble simplicity, and I have accordingly shunned all parade of natural difficulty in favor of clearness ; nor have I sought or studied novelty if it did not arise naturally from the situation of the character and

poetical expression ; and there is no rule of composition which I have not thought it my duty to sacrifice, in order to favor passion and produce effects."

Mozart shows, in his works, his tacit recognition of the necessity of the harmonious union of the spirit of the music, with that of the poetry, for in his dramatic compositions, their character corresponds with that of the drama upon which they are based, rising in dignity commensurately to the spirit of the particular scene.

Mr. D. says, "Mozart, the supreme musician, produces his best music there, where the poet has given him a worthy chance, and has risen a little above the ordinary *libretto* groove. Mozart possessed, more than any other musician, the subtlest and deepest instinctive knowledge of his art. He knew for certain that it was an art of expression only, of the sublimest and most perfect expression, still of expression, and nothing beyond. To his honor, be it said, it was impossible for him to make poetical music, if the poetical groundwork was null. He could not write music to "*Titus*" equal to "*Don Giovanni*,"—to "*Così Fan tutte*" equal to "*Figaro*." Good music he always wrote, but beautiful music only when he was inspired. His inspiration certainly came from within, but it never shone so bright as when it was lighted from without. Wagner expresses his conviction, more than once, that Mozart would, with his supreme instinct, have solved the problem of a real musical drama, but as it was, he could only give the truest and most intense expression to the airs, duets and *ensemble* pieces, which his fabricators of *libretti* handed to him. He has attested the inexhaustible puissance of music as a means of expression, better than Gluck and any of his successors ; but in the main, he also leaves the traditional operatic forms as he found them."

Of Rossini, he says :—"With Rossini, and, in an increased ratio, with his successors, the history of the Opera is simply that of operatic melody ; naked, absolute, ear-tickling melody, which one sings and whistles without knowing wherefore ; which one exchanges to-day for that of yesterday, and forgets again to-morrow for no reason whatsoever ; which sounds melancholy when we are amused, and joyous when we are disgusted ; and which we hear *apropos* of any and everything. Take Rossini's works all in all, and you have numberless operatic melodies of here and there, an immensely effective sort, but comparatively little beyond. His object has evidently been to pour forth multitudes of pleasing tunes, such as are fit to be whistled and sung by all the world. If he occasionally gives a powerful dramatic effect, one hails it as something unexpected ; for, as a rule, an Opera of his is like a string of

beads, each bead being a glittering and intoxicating tune. Dramatic and poetic truth, and all that makes a stage performance interesting is sacrificed to tunes. The task of the composer of Italian Opera, after Rossini, came to be little beyond that of manufacturing variations on one fixed type of aria, for this or that particular singer. And, together with the advent of Rossini, the operatic public in general, that most equivocal of all *public*, ('*Combien de sots faut il pour faire un public*,') became the sole arbiter of artistic reputation, the ultimate Court of Appeal in questions of artistic excellence; its taste, the sole guide for artistic production, and its favorite purveyor of tunes, the autocrat of the whole operatic entertainment."

Meyerbeer's Operas are rather to be seen than heard. His voluminous compositions, abounding with proofs of his marvellous knowledge of orchestration, with instrumental effects and combinations unknown perhaps, to any other composer, if we except Berlioz, the author of the celebrated work so well-known to students of instrumentation, show that the amazing fertility of his genius was applied to musical eccentricities and orchestral effects, rather than to the legitimate musical drama appealing to the hearts of the hearers, instead of stunning them with tremendous noises, and dazzling their eyes with gorgeous scenery and costumes.

When the poet has exhausted the powers of his art, then the musician comes in, and intensifies its emotional effect by a corresponding combination of sounds. The composer should create sounds that will produce an effect upon the sensuous perception, similar to that which the words to which he sets his music produce. Now, if these sounds alone will cause the same emotions as the poem alone, will they not, when combined, produce a doubly powerful effect? The duty of the musician, then, is to grasp the thought of the poet, and to add to it a corresponding musical thought. It is in order that this may be more fully accomplished, that Wagner suggests *mythos* as the subject matter, and is disposed to reject historical drama, in order that purely emotional, or rather sentimental matter, may be obtained free from political or national prejudices.

As in the drama, different phases of emotion arise in the course of its development, and become interwoven with one another, arousing conflicting feelings and bringing into play the various passions, so, according to Wagner, musical themes should arise, be developed and interwoven with one another in a manner analogous.

"Each of the phases of emotion just spoken of, has for its outcome

some clearly marked and decided musical expression, some characteristic musical theme ; and just as there is an intimate connection between the phases of emotion, so an intimate interlacing of the musical themes takes place, which interlacing spreads itself, not only over an entire scene, but over the whole extent of the drama. It is never made use of for the display of any purely musical combination *per se*, but it is always in the closest relationship, and most complete union with the poet's dramatic intentions. Thus that wonderful power, by which a great musician can make his phrase undergo metamorphosis after metamorphosis, without losing its character as the expression of some distinct emotion, is here developed to a hitherto unknown extent ; and the means of dramatic expression are in consequence infinitely widened and enlarged."

He discards the arbitrary forms of recitative aria, &c. His great principle is that just given in his own words. The intimate connection between the musical and dramatic phases of emotion in their sequence, development and combination, so that the whole shall form a complete organism, one and indivisible. All that is now required, is to confide the musical drama to actors capable of properly interpreting it.

Singers should be merely spokesmen of the dramatic and musical intentions of the composer, and not arrogate to themselves the supremacy, they, in many cases, now hold. They must be subordinate to the composer, or how can they interpret the ideas produced from his brain. A composer is, unfortunately, absolutely dependent upon this medium of communication between himself and the world, and it is in the highest degree unjust, that the singer should be permitted to interpret his ideas in any way other than he directs.

The Opera at present is really enjoyed by very few. Many people go, because it is fashionable ; they keep their carriage and their box at the Opera, while those less favored by fortune follow the fashion in the upper boxes or amphitheatre, where they ape those below in their principal occupation—the diligent use of the lorgnette. The wealthy loll in their stalls, and intersperse the perusal of the boxes, with yawns : they may be interested by a new *prima donna* if she is pretty, and gives them some good vocal fireworks. Will any one deny that this state of things, is woefully defective ? Wagner says that, by the judicious combination of poetry, music and mimetics, we can call forth the most intense emotions of the mind. Is there not then much room for improvement ?

"The entire work, then, intended by Wagner is musical in spirit, and

could have been conceived by none but a man of universal artistic instincts, who is, at the same time, a great modern musician. Its mythical subject matter, chosen because of its essentially emotional nature ; its division into scenes and the sequence of these ; the use of alliterative verse and its melodious declamation ; the use of the orchestra, preparing, supporting, commenting, enforcing, recalling ; all its factors are imbued with the spirit of music. Their task is not accomplished if any one side of the subject remains to be supplied by some process of abstract reasoning on the hearer's part. 'They are to appeal exclusively to our feelings. The sole test of what sort of thing is to be said lies in the expressive power of music. Being emotional throughout, the musical drama stands higher as a form of art than the spoken play. In it, the profound pathos of dramatic speech is not left to the discrimination of the individual actor. The musician's sure *technique* positively fixes every accent and every inflection, and a composer in the act of conducting such a drama is so completely in unison with the singers and players, that one may talk without hyperbole of an actual metempsychosis, his very soul speaks from out of the performers."

Music, in the present age, has not the rank to which it is entitled. It is considered as a mere pastime ; something to be taken up merely to wile away a weary hour. Musicians do not hold the rank in society which is their due. The highest capacity, coupled with long and severe study, are unnecessary to make a good composer. I do not here refer to those who produce sounds by means of the fatal facilities of the organ or piano, which they transfer to paper, and depend upon correctness of the harmony merely by the sound produced on the instrument. A true composer requires nothing but pen, ink and paper. No recourse to any instrument is necessary. In his mind he hears the effects which his combinations produce. He perceives them as clearly as if the orchestra was before him. The musical notes are the symbols of his thoughts, as words are of those of the poet. He sees their effect as clearly as the author does, of the words which he writes. It is not more necessary for him to hear them upon an instrument than for the author to hear his writings read aloud in order to feel the force of them. It was by this knowledge, that Beethoven, when perfectly deaf, produced such beautiful works.

Is it not true, that music possesses, in a more perfect degree than the sister arts, an incorporeal spirituality, an ethereal nature? Great as are the

imaginative powers of painting and sculpture, they are necessarily associated with substance, as they are the representation of objects in nature.

The sculptor chisels the stubborn marble, with the human form as an original,—the painter copies the gorgeous hues of the setting sun, while the musician can learn nothing to advance his art from the sweetest notes of the nightingale.

Music is ethereal, a mysterious spell, a subtle influence, an invisible power which enthrals, we know not why. Now we are sunk in a delicious languor, a lake of sound bathes us in its sweet waters; now the tears drop from our eyelids, but they are tears of joy; our whole frame is permeated with the exquisite influence. What study can be more elevating, more refining, if undertaken in the true spirit of art?

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